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Comment: The Role of Happenstance in Multidisciplinary Education

Jenifer S. Heath*

The value of multidisciplinary education seems evident. We live in times of rapid change. Technical specialists need a broad perspective on (and flexible approach to) risk management. Further, they need the ability to communicate with, and more fully appreciate the roles of, specialists in other fields. Finally, they increasingly need to be able to deal with demands for more public participation in risk management.

I think of myself as a toxicologist, but I am involved with communication and management as well as risk assessment. The results of laboratory animal studies are not ends in and of themselves. Rather, this information is used to evaluate health risks to humans and environmental receptors and to make decisions about the management of toxicologic risk. These decisions can have both lifestyle and economic impacts, and the underlying science must often be made meaningful to lay persons. Multidisciplinary education can enhance toxicologists' appreciation of the implications of their work and enable them to contribute more effectively.

Wanting to develop a broad perspective, I sought graduate-level training where I could pursue multidisciplinary interests formally. However, it was difficult to locate a program. Obstacles included lack of

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funding; the absence of ongoing, truly multidisciplinary, research or a mechanism for tapping into outside resources; and skepticism among potential mentors and peers about the value of nontraditional training.

Therefore, I was pleased to discover a program at Cornell where faculty members understood and strongly supported multidisciplinary training. While my major was environmental toxicology, I was able to pursue minors in organization behavior (in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations) and public policy.

My research focused on risk management activities in a series of communities and hinged on observation of and interviews with community members, industry representatives, and regulators. That I was able to pursue it can be attributed to a number of factors. First, the graduate school at Cornell encourages freedom in designing courses of study. Second, the Director of the Institute of Comparative and Environmental Toxicology during that period was enthusiastic about the contributions of nontraditional disciplines to the broad field of toxicology. Third, a multidisciplinary research group, including a toxicologist, a nutritionist, a chemist, and a cultural anthropologist, had already formed and begun developing a research program. Fourth, that group had already obtained fellowship money and research funds for graduate students. Finally, the director of the program, members of the research group, and members of my dissertation committee supported my research interests, even in the face of opposition from other members of the toxicology program.

Yet, I believe that my success was the result of happy circumstance. Multidisciplinary teams form, dissolve, and reform. Students interested in multidisciplinary education confront an ever-shifting mosaic of opportunity, and success depends mostly on being in the right place at the right time.

